

# Old Greek Stories

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## Admetus and Alcestis

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### I. The Slave

In a little town north of Delphi, and not very far from the sea, there lived a young man named Admetus. He was the ruler of the town, and hence was called its king; but his kingdom was so small that he could walk all round it in half a day. He knew the name of every man and woman and child in the town, and everybody loved him because he was so gentle and kind and at the same time a king.

Late one day, when the rain was falling and the wind was blowing cold from the mountains, a beggar came to his door. The man was ragged and dirty and half starved, and Admetus knew that he must have come from some strange land, for in his own country no one ever went hungry. So the kind king took him into the house and fed him; and after the man had bathed he gave him his own warm cloak, and bade the servants make a place for him to sleep through the night.

In the morning Admetus asked the poor man his name, but he shook his head and made no answer. Then Admetus asked him about his home and his country; and all that the man would say

was: "Make me your slave, master! Make me your slave, and let me serve you for a year."

The young king did not need another servant. But he saw that the poorest slave in the land was better off than this man, and so he took pity on him. "I will do as you ask," he said. "I will give you a home and food and clothing; and you shall serve me and be my slave for one year."

There was but little that the stranger knew how to do, and so he was sent to the hills to take care of the king's sheep and goats. For a whole year he tended the flocks, finding the greenest pastures and the freshest water for them, and keeping the wolves away. Admetus was very kind to him, as he was to all his servants, and the food and clothing which he gave him were of the best in the land. But the stranger did not tell his name nor say anything about his kindred or his home.

When a year and a day had passed, it so happened that Admetus was walking out among the hills to see his sheep. All at once the sound of music fell upon his ear. It was no such music as shepherds play, but sweeter and richer than any he had ever heard before. He looked to see where the sound came from. Ah! who was that sitting on the hilltop, with the sheep around him listening to his music? Surely it was not his shepherd?

It was a tall and handsome young man, clad in robes lighter and finer than any king might wear. His face was as bright as sunbeams, and his eyes gleamed like lightning. Upon his shoulder was a silver bow, from his belt hung a quiver of sharp arrows, and in his hands was a golden lyre. Admetus stood still and wondered. Then the stranger spoke:

"King Admetus," he said, "I am the poor beggar whom you fed—your slave to whom you were so kind. I have served you, as I

agreed, for a whole year, and now I am going home. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Yes,” said Admetus; “tell me your name.”

“My name is Apollo,” was the answer. “Twelve months ago my father, mighty Jupiter, drove me away from before his face and bade me go out friendless and alone upon the earth; and he told me that I should not turn again towards home until I had served a year as some man’s slave. I came to you, ragged and half starved, and you fed and clothed me; and I became your slave, and you were as kind to me as though I were your son. What shall I give you to reward you?”

“Lord of the Silver Bow,” said the king, “I have all that any man can want. I am happy in the thought that I have been of some help to you. I can ask for nothing more.”

“Very well,” said Apollo; “but if the time should ever come when you need my help, let me know.”

Then the bright prince walked swiftly away, playing sweet music as he went; and Admetus with glad heart returned to his home.

## II. The Chariot

From the place where Admetus lived it was only a few miles to Iolcus, a rich city by the sea. The king of Iolcus was a cruel tyrant named Pelias, who cared for nobody in all the world but himself. This Pelias had a daughter named Alcestis, who was as fair as any rose in June and so gentle and good that everybody praised her. Many a prince from over the sea had come to woo Alcestis for his wife; and the noblest young men in Greece had tried to win her favor. But there was only one to whom she would listen, and that was her young neighbor, King Admetus.

So Admetus went before gruff King Pelias to ask him whether he might wed Alcestis.

“No one shall have my daughter,” said the old king, “until he proves that he is worthy to be my son-in-law. If you want her, you must come for her in a chariot drawn by a lion and a wild boar. If you come in any other way, she shall not be your wife.” And Pelias laughed, and drove the young man out of his palace.

Admetus went away feeling very sad; for who had ever heard of harnessing a lion and a wild boar together in a chariot? The bravest man in the world could not do such a thing as that.

As he walked along and saw the sheep and goats feeding on the hilltops near his own town, he chanced to think of Apollo and of the last words that he had heard him say: “When you need my help, let me know.”

“I will let him know,” said Admetus.

Early the next morning he built an altar of stones in the open field; and when he had killed the fattest goat of the flock, he built a fire on the altar and laid the thighs of the goat in the flames. Then when the smell of the burning flesh went up into the air, he lifted his hands towards the mountain tops and called to Apollo.

“Lord of the Silver Bow,” he cried, “if ever I have shown kindness to the poor and the distressed, come now and help me. For I am in sore need, and I remember your promise.”

Hardly was he done speaking when bright Apollo, bearing his bow and his quiver of arrows, came down and stood before him.

“Kindest of kings,” he said, “tell me how I can help you.”

Then Admetus told him all about the fair Alcestis, and how her father would give her only to the man who should come for her in a

chariot drawn by a lion and a wild boar.

“Come with me,” said Apollo, “and I will help you.”

Then the two went together into the forest, the Lord of the Silver Bow leading the way. Soon they started a lion from its lair and gave chase to it. The fleet-footed Apollo seized the beast by its mane, and although it howled and snapped with its fierce jaws it did not touch him. Then Admetus started a wild boar from a thicket.

Apollo gave chase to it, too, making the lion run beside him like a dog. When he had caught the boar, he went on through the forest, leading the two beasts, one with his right hand, the other with his left; and Admetus followed behind.

It was not yet noon when they came to the edge of the woods and saw the sea and the city of Iolcus only a little way off. A golden chariot stood by the roadside as if waiting for them, and the lion and the boar were soon harnessed to it. It was a strange team, and the two beasts tried hard to fight each other; but Apollo lashed them with a whip and tamed them until they lost their fierceness and were ready to mind the rein. Then Admetus climbed into the chariot; and Apollo stood by his side and held the reins and the whip, and drove into Iolcus.

Old King Pelias was astonished when he saw the wonderful chariot and the glorious charioteer; and when Admetus again asked him for the fair Alcestis, he could not refuse. A day was set for the wedding, and Apollo drove his team back to the forest and set the lion and the wild boar free.

And so Admetus and Alcestis were married, and everybody in the two towns, except gruff old King Pelias, was glad. Apollo himself was one of the guests at the wedding feast, and he brought a present for the young bridegroom; it was a promise from the Mighty Folk upon the mountain top that if Admetus should ever be

sick and in danger of death, he might become well again if some one who loved him would die for him.

### **III. The Shadow Leader**

Admetus and Alcestis lived together happily for a long time, and all the people in their little kingdom loved and blessed them. But at last Admetus fell sick, and, as he grew worse and worse every day, all hope that he would ever get well was lost. Then those who loved him remembered the wedding gift which Apollo had given him, and they began to ask who would be willing to die in his stead.

His father and mother were very old and could hope to live but a short time at best, and so it was thought that one of them would be glad to give up life for the sake of their son. But when some one asked them about it, they shook their heads and said that though life was short they would cling to it as long as they could.

Then his brothers and sisters were asked if they would die for Admetus, but they loved themselves better than their brother, and turned away and left him. There were men in the town whom he had befriended and who owed their lives to him; they would have done everything else for him, but this thing they would not do.

Now while all were shaking their heads and saying "Not I," the beautiful Alcestis went into her own room and called to Apollo and asked that she might give up her life to save her husband. Then without a thought of fear she lay down upon her bed and closed her eyes; and a little while afterward, when her maidens came into the room they found her dead.

At the very same time Admetus felt his sickness leave him, and he sprang up as well and strong as he had ever been. Wondering how it was that he had been so quickly cured, he made haste to find Alcestis and tell her the good news. But when he went into her

room, he saw her lying lifeless on her couch, and he knew at once that she had died for him. His grief was so great that he could not speak, and he wished that death had taken him and spared the one whom he loved.

In all the land every eye was wet with weeping for Alcestis, and the cries of the mourners were heard in every house. Admetus sat by the couch where his young queen lay, and held her cold hand in his own. The day passed, and night came, but he would not leave her. All through the dark hours he sat there alone. The morning dawned, but he did not want to see the light.

At last the sun began to rise in the east, and then Admetus was surprised to feel the hand which he held growing warm. He saw a red tinge coming into the pale cheeks of Alcestis.

A moment later the fair lady opened her eyes and sat up, alive and well and glad.

How was it that Alcestis had been given back to life?

When she died and left her body, the Shadow Leader, who knows no pity, led her, as he led all others, to the cheerless halls of Proserpine, the queen of the Lower World.

“Who is this who comes so willingly?” asked the pale-faced queen.

And when she was told how Alcestis, so young and beautiful, had given her life to save that of her husband, she was moved with pity; and she bade the Shadow Leader take her back again to the joy and sunlight of the Upper World.

So it was that Alcestis came to life; and for many years she and Admetus lived in their little kingdom not far from the sea; and the Mighty Ones on the mountain top blessed them; and, at last, when they had become very old, the Shadow Leader led them both away together.

